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THE SCRIPT EDITOR'S GUIDE TO DR WHO STORYLINES

I apologise for sending out this printed sheet. The reasons are simply that I receive such mountainous piles of unsolicited storylines - some up to twenty or even (unbelievably) thirty pages long - that the task of reading them all and replying in any kind of detail at all is taking up disproportionately huge amounts of programme production time; and since nearly all the storylines I get from first time triers tend to fall into the same traps I find I'm writing variations on the same letter over and over again.

Here then are a few general guidelines which I hope will be useful:-

1. Brevity is the soul of storylines.

We don't want to plough through twenty pages of closely typed prose trying to work out what the story is about. At the initial stage of story ideas we just want to know what the idea is, how it resolves, and whether it promises sufficient areas of conflict to sustain a hundred minutes of tension and drama. If that takes more than two or three pages then the idea hasn't been thought out well enough. There is absolutely no point in working out all the complicated details of the plot mechanics - who is running after whom at what time and with which monkey wrench - until the basic plot concepts have been properly hammered out. You wouldn't start to build a house until everyone was agreed about where it was going to be and how many rooms it was going to have.

Some basic principles of salesmanship are involved here, and it is important not to forget that a script writer is basically in the business of selling his ideas. Imagine the reactions of a harrassed script editor faced on the one hand with a very lengthy and detailed exposition of a complicated plotline that he can't fully understand on one reading, and on the other hand with a short pithy idea that is irresistibly concise.

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1. (Continued)
To put it another way, your job is to make a script editor go "wow" rather than "wwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwzzzzzzzzzz". And that's a good test, because it's the script editor's job to make sure that the Saturday night audience goes "wow" rather than "wwwwwwwwzzzzz ...".
2. Four or six parterers?
Don't submit ideas for six parterers. Whilst we are very happy to encourage new writers, and are always on the lookout for fresh talent, we inevitably take a big risk every time we commission somebody new, and will only ever consider letting a new writer loose on a four parter. Six parterers are invariably given to experienced Dr Who writers.
3. Daleks
Don't bother to submit stories involving Daleks. Terry Nation invented the beasts, he owns the copyright, and quite properly reserves the right to write Dalek stories himself. In fact the copyright in all monsters and characters are owned by the writer who invented them. It's far better to invent your own.
4. The Master
We've used the character once since the loss of Roger Delgado but don't think we should do so again. Please don't submit Master stories.
5. Whose story?
This point seems almost too obvious to mention, but it's surprising how often we get storylines which are quite clearly based on previous Dr Who stories, or at least elements of them. This is pointless in the extreme. Obviously it's terribly difficult to be thoroughly original after a hundred stories, but no one ever said that writing Dr Who isn't terribly difficult.

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I'm writing these notes on the assumption that most people who submit story lines are seriously interested in tackling the very tough professional job of writing for the programme. If, on the other hand, you are simply interested in concocting Dr Who stories for your own pleasure then please remember that by sending them in to the office for reading and comment you are actually taking up time that would otherwise be spent on increasing the quality of programmes we are actually making for transmission. It might be wiser in that case to send your stories to the Dr Who Appreciation Society (38 Melrose Avenue, Wimbledon Park, London SW19) who run lots of fan magazines in which fans can get their stories printed.

If you are serious in your intentions, then I hope these notes will be of use to you. Best of luck!

Douglas Adams
Script Editor
'Doctor Who'

jj/8.2.79